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ABSTRACT

Research papers produced by students in college composition classes are often boring, poorly written, and disappointing. One way to help students overcome their inability to write decent research reports is to assign them the task of handing in a three page trial-run mock research paper about three weeks before the final essay is due. They must create a piece in which they argue a position different from the one they anticipate taking for the final piece. This mock paper is written from the point of view of a fake persona which the student creates, and none of the research or quotes in the paper are real. The better students usually create a humorous narrator with little intellectual acumen, and the paper is funny and readable. Other students begin to see, by trying to argue against their supposed points, that their argument is slim and in need of major revision. For students who tend to plagiarize, the exercise forces them to wear the mask of authenticity. Finally, all of the dull laws regarding citation can be checked in the mock research paper. Overall, the teacher gets papers from students who are learning to experiment with their real voices and thus produce some of the most lively writing of the semester. (HB)

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Boning Up for the Research Paper: A Mock Trial

When I was a beginning composition teacher I was naive enough to think that my students, if permitted to "scratch where it itches," to follow their bliss, would write argumentative research papers--a requirement at the community college where I used to teach--and these papers would be interesting, volatile, arrestingly complicated. When their subjects for the papers ranged from herpes to Harleys, and when they argued that the sc-called scientific theories about the harmfulness of chewing tobacco were patently false (this wide-cheeked student dropped before completing the paper), I crowed about my effectiveness as a teacher and my incredible generosity: I, unlike those other stiff teachers, allowed my students to write about subjects they felt passionately about. I smiled at my students almost as a co-conspirator knowing they were so lucky to have me as their research guide.

After some boring classes (unanimous decision) about the mechanics of the works cited page, footnotes and logical transitions between paragraphs, after the peer-conferencing and the obligatory pilgrimage to the reference room, I collected the papers. The proud step-father, I was eager to take them home, ignore them for a long time, and then begin the EXPERIENCE: I

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would read with pleasure and see into my students' souls, or at least their brains. Little did I expect the sight I found: a horrible sight, reader, these deformed offspring. My students had disappeared and in their place I found, for the most part, beautifully quoted or blatantly plagiarised beautiful sentences from some authority figures I did not know.

I always say, and doubt it when I do, that I enjoy teaching composition because I get to know my students intimately, often. Deprived of my own bliss, I read angrily boring page after page of someone else's brain work--certainly not my students'--and when I returned to class I hid my dissatisfaction while I calmly discussed, for probably the fifth time, the importance of finding a voice and controlling a research paper by the power of the student's own mind or personality. But this calm was before the storm. After about fifteen minutes I experienced first-hand what's known as the return of the repressed: I let them have it. How dare they . . . blah, blah, blah. The course, which had been a near triumph before that point, began to take on water, then lean, and by the next class it was gone. We were all there, but we had undergone a sea change. We hated each other.

I am not writing now to bury myself, I am here to praise my own pedagogy. So I'm happy to say that those days of my youth are gone. Now I have a new and improved technique that effectively arrests bad habits before they start, kindles the creative spark in students, and allows me to read with some pleasure my students' research writing. This is no panacea, of course, but I like to think of it as one.

After students have begun researching a topic and formulating a thesis, I have them hand in a three page trial-run mock research paper about three weeks before the final essay is due. In this essay my students, God forgive me, lie. They write a fabricated research paper, full of false quotations, made up sources, never-to-be-published books and life--life! They create a piece in which they argue a position which is opposite to or a different shade of gray than their hoped for final paper. And they rely on no one but themselves for everything in the paper, all the while making the paper masquerade as the genuine thing. They still introduce the argument early on in the essay, title the piece, use MLA standards for footnotes and works cited, but they write the whole damn thing. Usually with a kind of demonic glee.

The students also hand-in--usually a few days before the mock research paper--a separate but equally frivolous piece of character description and perhaps character assassination. They give a portrait of their fake persona, giving us a glimpse into the character, his/her dress, breath, hair patterns, occupation, world view, or what I like to call for no reason their *Weltanschauung*. The work leading to the research paper suddenly, for a paragraph or two, becomes a creative writing sketch.

The plan for the mock research paper is faultless. The best students, who never would have plagiarised in the first place, enjoy the deconstructive act of arguing out of all sides of their mouths. They enjoy this form of play, usually making their opponent-cum-narrator into a comic character who inadvertently reveals himself as a truly hateful human. They benefit from letting

themselves fly outside the gridlock world of realism and scholarly discipline. The student, for example, writing seriously about the complex social and psychological causes of eating disorders can viciously create a speaker limited above the neck who argues that anorexics just need to enjoy themselves at life's table. She can quote from Fidel Gastro's new book Just Say Yes To Bulk, in which he makes it clear that this eating disorder is caused simply by personal weirdness; social critics who think body shape is shaped by social conventions are just going on "a gender bender" (666), to use Gastro's own words.

The students who aren't completely comfortable with the idea of combining an argument with research usually begin to see quite clearly--on their own--how their proposed paper just won't cut it. They recognize, by trying to argue against their central point(s), that they have slim or no points. They were planning, they realize, to research and report facts, facts that would make it impossible for their own personality to be revealed. The student writing on herpes, for example, quickly noticed that to suggest that herpes is a sometimes painful, always non-fatal disease that can be transmitted sexually just wasn't good enough since it could not be argued against. He switched after only a few days of considering his mock paper to the reasons the federal government should pitch in with grant money to fight the spread of STDs among sexually active teens. Once this recognition takes place, these students work diligently on trying first to formulate an argument, and then a kind of counter-argument; they then pleasurably arrive at the zone of playful license, and write papers that are a joy to

read and that make the next paper, the "genuine article," also a kind of joy.

The third group, the host of inadvertent plagiarists, discover by writing the mock paper what a research paper feels like, what it weighs. It is clear to them that, if a scale were used, the narrative voice, the voice arguing a position, clearly outweighs the stuff of research. They begin to discover, once again empirically, that their character--that voice which they will modulate and almost copy for the final paper--is the central focus of the essay. They will learn that quotations should be used to buttress an argument, but that the scaffolding of the argument has to be already in place.

Some students plagiarize because they wish to, not because they slip into an accidental tragedy. These students will be at a loss. They will be forced, for a day and a night, to wear the mask of authenticity. The hope is that these students, once they discover the pleasures of their own voice or an imagined voice, will be converted, through lies, to tell the truth on their subsequent paper. There is great rejoicing when that one lost sheep returns to the fold of academic honesty. Of course, some sheep are just nasty. They believe strongly in justification by plagiarism and laziness alone. Sometimes when I am feeling particularly befuddled by life's mysteries, I hang on to the notion that perhaps God invented the letter F so we can brand it on the true plagiarists' coats.

Finally, all the abysmally dull laws for proper citations can be checked in the mock research paper, but because the students

have made up the names of the authors and the book titles--John B. Sweet's Sugar Substitutes: A Dying Art--hopefully there has been pleasure in the construction of the lists. No one minds the helpful red-ink hints the teacher supplies because they can be used for the following piece. Students especially enjoy collaborative work on fake titles of essays and books, and the fake authors' names; their hostility to authority is given a small vent. Even at 8 a.m. students will giggle while they work at these comic and sometimes cruel inventions.

This technique of putting ideas into practice in a dry (though witty) run beats less effective ways of teaching: talk, talk, talk in conferencing, in class, in hints to peer-editing groups about the importance of having an argument, avoiding plagiarism and singing with your own voice. Students actually pick up rather easily these complicated and difficult ideas by lying through their teeth while they smile. They get it. And the teacher gets fake research papers that are usually the most playful and spirited pieces of the semester, followed by the real works of research which are lively scholarly essays, or at least lively essays, or at least essays.

Works Cited

Gastro, Fidel. Just Say Yest To Bulk. 2d ed. Carbodale: All You Can Eat Press, 1990.